



USED AND ABUSED

Modern-day slavery

Five recent cases with slavery convictions

These slavery cases were uncovered and prosecuted in Florida in the past six years. Most involved farm workers.

Three men try to escape Lake Placid contractor

On the night of May 27, 2000, a labor contractor in DeSoto County attacked the driver of a van who was about to take three Mexican men to North Carolina.

The three, who had been held against their will, wanted better work. They said they were spending too much of their earnings to settle their \$1,000 smuggling debt to Ramiro Ramos, 43, and Ramos' brother and cousin.

Ramos struck driver Jose Martinez in the face with a pistol several times, accusing him of stealing his workers, Martinez said. Police were called, and Martinez testified at trial.

On June 29, 2002, the Ramoses were convicted of involuntary servitude. Ramiro and his brother, Juan, 35, were sentenced in Fort Pierce last November to 12 years; and their cousin, Jose Luis Ramos, 46, to 10 years. They also were ordered to forfeit \$3 million in money and property amassed through their crimes.

Two cousins locked in trailer with 22 other farm workers

Jose Antonio Martinez and Francisco Martinez got sick of working 10 hours to make \$15 after being promised \$150 per day.

Almost all their money in early 1999 went to their labor contractors for rent, food and their \$750 smuggling fees. After picking tomatoes all day, they weren't allowed to leave the roach-infested trailer they shared with 22 other workers west of Immokalee.

"You were locked up... you couldn't stick your head out," Francisco said. The floor had holes through which they saw snakes, and their mattresses were on the floor.

The cousins escaped and eventually reported the contractors to the Coalition of Immokalee Workers (CIW), which contacted the U.S. Department of Justice.

Abel Cuello Jr., Bacilio Cuello and German Covarrubias pleaded guilty to smuggling workers and involuntary servitude. On Sept. 20, 1999, Abel Cuello was sentenced to 33 months and ordered to pay \$29,000 in restitution. Bacilio Cuello was sentenced to two years, and Covarrubias was given four years probation. Both of the Cuellos have since been released.

Contractor recruited workers from homeless shelters

In April 1997, a team of St. Lucie County sheriff's deputies, on duty near Fort Pierce, was approached by George Williams, who said he'd just escaped from a house where he had been held against his will and beaten by a labor contractor named Michael Allen Lee.

Williams and other men had been recruited from homeless shelters in central and southern Florida and forced to work picking crops for Lee. Prosecutors later said Lee often paid his workers in alcohol and drugs, including crack cocaine. He charged up to \$40 a gallon for cheap wine. He beat them if they tried to leave.

Williams and nine others filed a civil suit against Lee and his business associates, which was settled in January 1999 for an undisclosed amount. In December 2000, a federal grand jury indicted Lee on the criminal charge of servitude. He pleaded guilty, and in 2001 he and another defendant were sentenced to four years in prison.

15-year-old girls forced to work as prostitutes

In November 1997, two 15-year-old Mexican girls escaped a trailer near West Palm Beach and told authorities a brutal tale.

They said they had been smuggled into the United States by a Mexican family and promised work in the health care industry. Instead, they were forced to become prostitutes, working in a string of trailers around south and central Florida — several in Palm Beach County — that catered to migrant workers. They were warned that if they tried to escape, their family members in Mexico would be harmed.

They were told they had to work off \$2,000 or more in smuggling fees. They were paid only about \$3 per sexual encounter, minus extra debts such as medical expenses. At least two dozen other women worked in the brothels with them — some as young as 14.

Prosecutors later said the people-smuggling and prostitution racket was run by Rogelio Cadena, originally of Veracruz, Mexico, and about seven family members. Prosecutors accused the Cadena family and its employees of brutalizing women — beating them, forcing them to have abortions, locking a rebellious girl in a closet for 15 days.

In January 1999, Rogelio Cadena pleaded guilty, was sentenced to 15 years and forced to pay \$1 million to the federal government.

Woman smuggled to Florida, kept as personal slave

Collier County sheriff's deputies answered a domestic abuse call at the house of Guatemala native Jose Tecum in Immokalee one night in November 1999. They found Maria Choz, 20, consumed by tears. She said Tecum was keeping her as a slave.

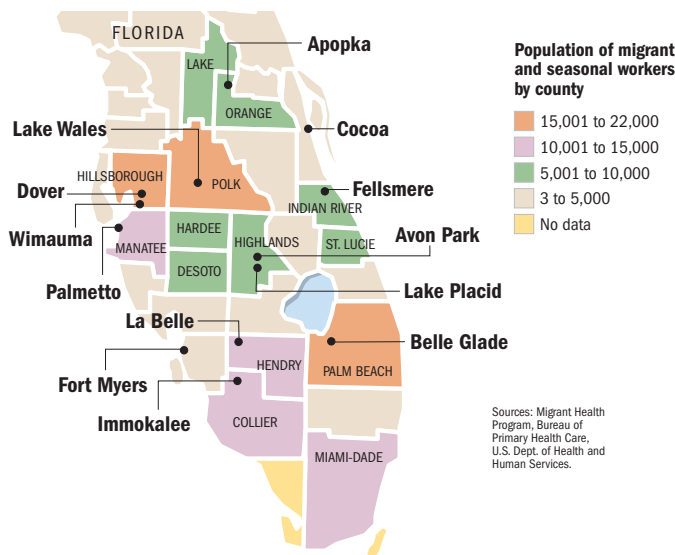
Choz and Tecum were from the same area in Guatemala. Tecum had tried to buy her from her poor family, Choz told police. He eventually raped her and threatened to kill her or her father if she didn't come to Florida with him.

Tecum made her live in the same house with his wife and children and forced her to have sex when his wife was not there. He found her work in the fields but took almost all the money she made.

In 2000, Tecum was found guilty of involuntary servitude, kidnapping and smuggling and in 2001 was sentenced to nine years.

Migrant towns in this series

Not far from Florida's affluent coasts lie rural towns where foreign farm workers cluster during harvest time, providing the state with the nation's third highest migrant and seasonal population. These towns were among the many that *The Palm Beach Post* visited for this series.



Slavery is not just the shameful stuff of history books — not in Florida

It exists today, according to both migrant advocates and federal prosecutors. In fact, given the labor system that supplies many of the state's largest groves and farms with migrant field hands, instances of slavery may be inevitable.

Every day, undocumented workers are smuggled into the United States from Mexico, and tens of thousands eventually are transported to Florida. They then must do hard labor to pay off large smuggling fees — at least hundreds of dollars and at times thousands.

In some cases, even when workers are here legally, the money earned is much less than what was promised by labor contractors, and the workers want out. Sometimes, migrants are locked up by contractors and threatened with violence.

That, the courts have ruled, is modern-day slavery.



Bearing the burden of poverty: Florida migrant field hands head for a truck with buckets full of banana peppers. Many are undocumented workers from impoverished Mexican towns, smuggled into a contract labor system that capitalizes on their illegal status.

Cocoa farm imprisoned us, women say

By CHRISTINE EVANS
Palm Beach Post Staff Writer

The women of Hidalgo were earth-scratch poor. Their corn grew fitfully in rough patches. Their coffee groves no longer paid to harvest.

And so, one by one, they went to see "Florentina," the recruiter who promised jobs in the United States. They signed her papers, bought their passports, kissed their families, and, a bit scared but optimistic, boarded buses for Florida, the promised land.

They thought. They did not know, they say, that they would be working such long hours for such little pay. Or that, while working for Hydro Age, a gourmet hydroponic tomato farm in Cocoa, they would be locked up at night.

"El patron would put a lock on the gate where our trailers were, and he or a trusted worker were the only ones who could open it," said Marisol Ponce-Rubio, now back home in Mexico. "If we asked permission, sometimes we could go out, but only between 7 and 8 at night on the weekend... It

was such hard work for such little money.

"The boss would say you have to finish your work, no matter how much time it takes. Sometimes, he would find us after hours in our trailers and tell us to do more. The hours were never counted. We didn't have pay stubs."

Norma Delgado: A plaintiff in the suit against Hydro Age.

Hydro Age, which enjoyed positive press coverage about its innovative growing techniques during the years the women were employed — 1999 to 2003 — breached "numerous" contract provisions and "falsely imprisoned" the women, according to a class-action lawsuit brought on behalf of 15 women by Florida Legal Services.

In interviews with *The Palm Beach Post*, six women described how they left their families in Mexico for legal, seasonal employment through the

U.S. Department of Labor's agricultural guest worker program. The women had different experiences with common themes: Shorted paychecks and long hours, all under the watchful eyes of bosses who made sure they didn't leave.

"After a time, they would not let us communicate with other people," said Rodolinda Garcia Montealegre, who to her distress was told she could not go to church. "Everything was locked up with a key."

Norma Franco Delgado, 24, said she usually received permission to leave the grounds once every weekend, an arrangement she could live with. But she said she resented the seven-day work weeks because the pay was not what she had been promised.

When she complained, she said, the boss told her "the reason the pay was low was that the tomatoes weren't selling the way they expected."

Leo Calligaro of Hydro Age, who is named in the suit, did not return several calls for comment. A lawyer for Hydro Age, John Biedenham Jr., said the company "strongly denies

the allegations in the complaint and intends to vigorously contest them."

Some of the women served out their contracts, and some left. Ponce-Rubio and her sister Ana scaled a fence and jumped into the waiting cars of friends.

"We called and told them to help us escape," she says. "They came at night. It was all planned."

Another worker, Maria Eugenia Chavez Ramirez, said employees had to dip their bare feet in a chlorine solution before entering the work area. "Some of the girls got sores on their feet and itching."

Other workers complained about having to fumigate tomato plants without proper protection. "They would feel sick later," one ex-employee said.

But it was the pay arrangement that bothered Chavez most. Unlike some other workers, she said, she received a pay stub — an inaccurate one.

"We realized later that the check stub said the pay was for one week when it was really for two weeks.

"They were cheating us."